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Soul Retrieval

Instructions for Soul Searching was a compilation of images made by Luis Sahagun, intricately a mix of his personal culture and the meanings of loss. A focal point in one of the pictures is the mobile botanica, meant to act as a healing space offering ancestral remedies for grief. The artist himself is the character present, surrounded by golden leaves. It was the original reason as to why I chose the painting. I think the inability of seeing the artist's face and also his body adorned with golden leaves both confused and intrigued me. Luis Sahagun is a visiting professor of drawing and sculpture and is notable for practicing folk healing. As he is a mix of Mexican-Indigenous, the title and subcontexts of the work, *Instructions for Soul Searching*, 2026, seem to connect more. Through a blend of ancestral Curanderismo practices and modern performance, Sahagun successfully creates a piece that challenges the viewer to reconsider the relationship between the physical body and the spiritual self.

One of the images, specifically the one with the person meditating in the middle, is both a jarring and beautiful scene in its entirety. The background seems to be a big quantity of water, with a big tree uprooted and stuck in the water. The shrubbery on the sides of the picture hides a satchel on the bottom left, potentially the person's materials before they meditate. The man in the middle is in a traditional meditating pose, shirtless while covered in gold leaf, with white pants on. In his left hand, there seems to be a circular piece of wood connected by jagged metal, also

covering his hand. Near his right, the metal holds seven red candles, which I believe are connected to the major headpiece he is wearing. A bit hard to describe from so far away, it looks like the same jagged metal typically surrounding his body slowly curving the closer it gets to his head. As mentioned in the wall text, I believe the man is meant to meditate near the mobile botanica and altar, which could be what he has in his left hand. The text mentioned the altar contains sacred plants and materials to be used as a cleansing agent for the body. The second image has a closer-up of the man's face, which I can see has a mix of both golden leaves and black paint. The metal head/body piece outlines his face, with horizontal pieces of metal in front of the eyes and the shape of his face. I found it nice to note that Davidson College students from his *Curanderx Aesthetics* class were active participants in the performance, which to me emphasizes the communal nature of the work.

In the work *Instructions for Soul Searching*, Sahagun utilizes the gallery not merely as a space for observation, but as the text calls it, a 'metaphysical portal' for healing. His primary objective appears to be the embodiment of 'Curanderismo,' transformed into a contemporary academic shoutout. By centering the performance around concepts like soul loss, Sahagun's meditation seeks to provide comfort and nourishment for the intangible anxieties of modern life. I see the goal of this art piece to move the audience from a state of passive viewing to one of active participation in an ancestral lineage, suggesting that art can function as a literal technology for navigating the spiritual self.

I believe that visually, the work succeeds in said goal through its striking juxtaposition. The documentation of the image captured in the body of water captures a fascinating tension- the jagged headpiece aesthetic clashes with the soft, natural gold leaf. This tension effectively mirrors the artist's goal of bridging the ancient and the modern. Sahagun ensures the viewer is

not just a tourist of his culture, but a guided participant in the narrative. I believe that perhaps the most successful element is the communal element of the piece, found by the use of the community of the students. It becomes a living, breathing practice that is actively being transmitted to a new generation within the Davidson community.

I remember first being drawn to choose this piece for its striking visuals. The gold leaves on the man's body were breathtaking, and I had been looking forward to visiting this exhibit to see all the community's art. I did not leave underwhelmed. I am not too familiar with art and how exactly to examine it, but once I learned the underlying context of another route of 'medicine,' my pre-med brain was shocked! I would never have related meditation or cultural healing to be as effective as it is, and further research into the artist's context and the practice of Curanderismo gave insight into a topic I was unaware I needed insight on.